

MAKING OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS SECULAR

JACK GALVIN WAIGHT

Jack Galvin Waight delves into the reasons why it is essential to make our public schools secular havens . . .

As educators we know that in the classroom, and in modern society, time is crucial. Workloads are excessive and the curriculum is crowded. As outlined in my Eric Pearson 2021 Report: *Teaching not preaching: Making our public schools secular* Special Religious Education (SRE) is a massive waste of valuable learning time. The equivalent of the loss of a full term for a primary school graduate. It is also an administrative burden for schools and causes our students to both sit out and miss out. SRE, even contradicts the Department's own Schools Success Model that "requires a focus on teaching and learning" and the 2020 NSW Curriculum Review which recommended as a priority that the Government reduce the impact of extra-curricular issues and topics. (NSW Education Standard Authority [NESA], 2020)

Compounding this loss of valuable time is the weekly battle to keep our schools secular havens. Programs like *Hardcore Christians*, *Jesus Car Racing*, and Hillsong's *Shine* are considered, by academia, as the exact opposite of what is appropriate and required for our students and society. Like the discredited \$61million a year taxpayer funded chaplaincy program, there is a consensus that SRE is outdated, devalues the profession, potentially promotes extremism and is simply not appropriate for 21st Century learning.

My report (Galvin Waight, 2022), which was released in July 2022, analyses this research, examines special legal advice pertaining to legislation, and contains structured interviews with academics, activists, labour theorists, and union leaders. The paper provides key campaign recommendations to ensure that our NSW public education system is secular, inclusive and appropriately reflects multicultural and pluralistic contemporary society. The findings highlight that, as a profession, it is time for us take this time back. Our students need education not indoctrination.

A PROFESSION UNITED

This important work has started. For the first time ever in NSW, and as an outcome of my report there is a unified educational alliance — Primary Principals' Association (PPA), Secondary Principals' Council (SPC), the NSW Teachers Federation and the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations (P&C) — arguing that SRE/Special Education in Ethics (SEE) simply must go, or at the very least, not interfere with curriculum time.

These peak groups are calling on both sides of politics to implement an independent review of SRE/SEE¹.

It should be noted that there has not been an independent review of SRE since the 1980 Rawlinson report. The 2015 ARTD Consultancy² terms of reference examined only the implementation of SRE and SEE in NSW Government schools - it was not an independent review into SRE/SEE.

All peak educational groups are unified in their view that not interrupting curriculum time is essential. Noting that SRE/SEE could take place in schools at lunch/ recess or before and after school. A precedent for this was created in 2015, when the incoming Victorian Labor Government introduced a ministerial direction, removing Scripture from formal class time, virtually eliminating the program (Galvin Waight, 2022), Providers and any other religious or community groups could still apply to use public schools, outside of curriculum time, as part of the Department's Sharing of School Facilities policy (NSW Department of Education, 2021)

If it can happen in Victoria: it can happen in NSW. Both the Primary Principals Association (PPA), 2022, and the Secondary Principals Council (SPC) 2017 have published position papers on the issues which they have identified around SRE/SEE. They can be accessed via: <https://nswppa.org.au/position-papers> & <https://www.nswspc.org.au/position-papers/>. Federation also has a long-stand-

ing policy position that SRE has no place in NSW public schools and that any education (religious or not) should be done in line with an approved curriculum and by a qualified teacher. This includes Ethics which as highlighted in my research paper, started out with good intentions but has become a distraction, helped to legitimise SRE, and is now part of the problem.

PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Surveys and census data continues to reveal a growing community consensus and groundswell of public opinion for secular education and society. As part of my report Federation commissioned a Quantitative Survey of the NSW public and in April 2022 an online survey of 1,467 adults was conducted. Results showed that most parents

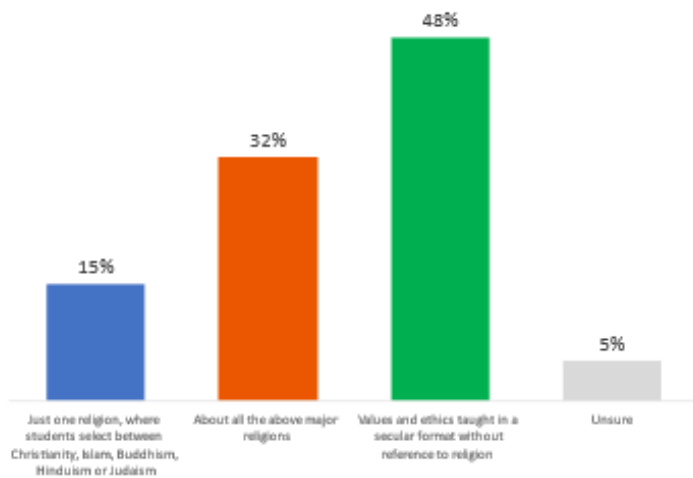
Australia, and NSW in particular, is completely out of step with the rest of the world. Most developed countries have recognised the dangers of extremism and have shifted to a world view General Religious Education (GRE) approach.³

This is highlighted by Dr Jennifer Bleazby’s 2022 study showing that religious instruction (SRE) can indoctrinate students by encouraging them to uncritically accept beliefs that are not well supported by evidence. Including conspiracy thinking, science denialism and extremist thinking. Her report concluded that it is time to seriously reevaluate the place of religious instruction in our schools.

Alarmingly, even the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in international legal cases has criticised

Most support is for secular values to be taught

Which would you most favour public schools to teach?



	One religion	All majors	Values
Men	16%	34%	45%
Women	15%	30%	50%
Metro Sydney	18%	34%	43%
Regional	11%	28%	54%
Western Sydney	25%	37%	33%
Public school mothers	17%	21%	58%
Public school parents	17%	29%	50%
Public primary school parents	17%	31%	47%
Public high school parents	20%	28%	48%
Parents of school aged kids	18%	33%	46%
Catholic school parent	22%	46%	31%
Independent school parents	26%	43%	29%
NESB	27%	38%	32%
Coalition voters	17%	33%	45%
Labor voters	12%	32%	52%
Soft voters	16%	28%	46%

want religion to be taught after school hours and that most support is for secular values to be taught. Of note, interviews revealed that when parents find out what is actually occurring in their children’s SRE lesson, they often become the greatest activists for change. Fairness in Religion in Schools (FIRIS) is one of these parent and community groups that continues to hold the Department, Providers and Government to account. [FIRIS](#) is most concerned that SRE is a self-regulating system with no oversight, and calls for the legislation to change and the time be given back to the professionals. This community activism, survey data and international research comparisons (Galvin Waight, 2022) show that

and likened countries that still have a segregated, partial exemption process such as NSW to a ‘ghetto approach’ (Evans, 2008b, p. 470). (Galvin Waight, 2022)

OUR UNFAIR FUNDING SYSTEM

Australia is also an international outlier when it comes to schools funding by continuing to maintain one of the highest concentrations of religious schools compared with other OECD countries. Approximately 30 per cent of all schools in Australia are affiliated with a religion and 94 per cent of private schools. (Centre for Public Education Research (CPER), 2022) This system of segregating children along lines of class, wealth, and religion, with large govern-

ment subsidies to private schools and little accountability, is unprecedented internationally.

The media has largely focused on the proportion of public money going to elite and well-endowed private schools, but my report examines what Jennifer Buckingham, from the Centre for Independent Studies, describes as “‘fundamentalist’ Christian schools.” (Galvin Waight, 2022),

As religious education author Marion Maddox outlines, in my interview with her, ‘Some of the philosophies underpinning these schools are far from benign yet many are receiving substantially more government funding than public schools’. (Galvin Waight, 2022)

In December 2022 ABC *Four Corners* rang me with questions about my report. Most significantly, they asked who is regulating and evaluating these schools? The programs [excellent investigative report](#) aired in January 2023 and investigates the disturbing practices of Opus Dei schooling and its influence in the NSW Liberal Party.

Reporter Louise Milligan reveals in some cases the schools are not following state curriculum. They are accused of persistent attempts to recruit teenagers to Opus Dei and of teaching misinformation about sexual health, including discouraging girls from getting the HPV cervical cancer vaccine. Former students at the elite schools reflect on the practices they say have scarred them for life, going as far as to call the schools “hell on earth.” (ABC *Four Corners*, 2023)

This is why Australia’s unfair and unsecular education system must continue to be challenged. This is why Federation continues to campaign for a funding system that prioritises public schools. This is why the School Chaplaincy Program (which remains unfettered by statute and oversight and that the High Court in 2014 ruled was of no benefit to students under the law) (Galvin Waight, 2022) must also be scrapped.

Recommendation 3 of my report calls on Federation and the AEU to reinvigorate a national campaign to replace chaplains with qualified school counsellors. For as Ron Williams (the dad who took on the government and Scripture Union QLD in the High Court and won twice), said in my interview: “Qualified school counsellors are exactly what is required we just need more of them.” (Galvin Waight, 2022)

MAKING HISTORY - A SECULAR REVOLUTION

In the early 19th century, Australians did something very special. We put aside our sectarian division, came together and created the world’s first legislated secular education system. At that time, we abolished state aid to religious schools and cemented the NSW public education system as one of the best in the world. We did this by embracing the secular⁴.

Australia, once leading the world in secular education and academic results, is now falling behind on the international stage. It is no coincidence that this has occurred in the time of a sustained period of de-secularisation. A small, but organised, religious lobby has influenced our public life, institutions, and policy. This lobby has taken an active interest in public education. It is time that we, as a nation and union, take a respectful interest in religion in schools too.

This does not mean we need to halt teaching of General Religious Education, values and world views. Yet a fear of backlash has left many politicians, teachers and members of the general public scared to come out and say what they believe. We can no longer afford to be silent and need to be ‘loud and proud’ of our secular beliefs. The groundswell of public opinion against SRE, government-funded chaplaincy and religious schools needs to become a people-power movement. For, as Australia becomes more polarised and divided on political and religious lines, embracing the secular has never been so important.

Federation is starting this process and later this year (2023) will host an inaugural secular conference. The aim of the conference will be to raise awareness, build key alliances, highlight key campaigns and begin the secular narrative. This is important because secularism has the potential to be a unifying political and social force and a movement for social justice.

Australia can once more lead the world in secular education and learning outcomes. Reclaiming the secular represents an opportunity on all sides of politics to unite and embrace inclusion. It represents an opportunity to create a society in which people of all religions, and of none, can live together fairly and peacefully.

Imagine a country where all religions are treated equally with the freedom to practise without fear of discrimination. A country where education is free of vested interests

and teachers are treated and respected as the professionals that we are.

Imagine a state:

- that doesn't compromise on secular legislation where schools have the appropriate time and resources to meet all students' needs
- where school children are taught about world religions by a qualified teacher as part of an inclusive, authorised curriculum
- where the educational focus is on student outcomes and creating a vibrant, cohesive society.

This can easily be us again. It's time that we, as a profession, take the secular lead in NSW. Our students and society need education not indoctrination, teachers not preachers.

END NOTES

1. This review should examine:

- The quality, and efficacy of the lessons, instructors and providers.
- The effects of missed teaching and learning on students and schools.
- Departmental policy and procedures,
- Australian Bureau of statistics (ABS) data and
- the collection and release of participation data on SRE/SEE, which has not occurred, despite this being a recommendation of the:
 - 1980 Rawlinson Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools Report
 - 2011 NSW Legislative Council inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill
 - 2015 ARTD (consultancy) review of SRE and Special Ethics Education.

2. ARTD Consultancy are a consultancy firm commissioned to review SRE in 2015

3. General Religious Education is "education about the world's major religions, what people believe and how those beliefs affect their lives". It is taught by qualified teachers employed by the Department of Education in a safe, respectful and inclusive classroom setting..

4. For more details about the history of our secular public education system, see the link to Maurie Mulheron's 2020 JPL article <https://cpl.nswtf.org.au/journal/semester-2-2020/the-achievement-of-public-education/>

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- NSW Primary Principal Association (2022) *Position Paper SRE – SEE* <https://nswppa.org.au/position-papers>
- NSW Secondary Principals Council (2017) *Position Paper SRE* <https://www.nswspc.org.au/position-papers/>

RESOURCES

On Thursday 13 April 2023, Jack participated in an ABC Live radio session about the issues he raised in his article. If you wish to listen to him below is the link: https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/should-religious-instruction-be-delivered-in-public-schools/102214806?utm_campaign=abc_radionational&utm_content=facebook&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_radionational

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Galvin Waight is author of the 2021 Eric Pearson Study Report entitled Teaching Not Preaching: Making Our Public Schools Secular. He is a Federation Country Organiser in the Hunter/Newcastle area, Vice President of Hunter Workers, Federation's Representative on the Department's Consultative Committee for Special Religious Education (SRE)/Special Education in Ethics (SEE) and DoE Excellence in Teaching and involvement in broader educational issues Award recipient.

